

# **BEAR HOUND HUNTER FOCUS GROUP MEETING SUMMARY**

## **NOVEMBER 27, 2007; LEXINGTON, VA**

### **GROUP PROFILE**

The Bear Hound Hunter focus group took place on November 27, 2007, in Lexington, VA, as part of a statewide effort to identify and evaluate issues of concern related to hound hunting in the state. Approximately twenty-eight bear hound hunters were invited to attend the focus group meeting. Invitees were selected because they had previously contacted the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) and expressed an interest in participating, because they had some involvement in hound hunting issues in the past, or because they were leaders in the hound hunting community. Of those invited, sixteen individuals attended the focus group meeting. Thirteen participants were men, three were women, and all were white.

All participants identified themselves as avid bear hunters. Many have participated in this activity since childhood. Many participants also use hounds to hunt for other game species including turkey, deer, raccoon, fox, squirrel, and rabbits. Several participants were members of the Virginia Bear Hunters Association, the Virginia Houndsmen and Sporting Dog Association, and other sportsmen or houndsmen groups; some participants held leadership positions in these organizations. Although the views expressed at this focus group meeting and reported in this summary only represent the participating individuals, it is informative to know the breadth of interests involved.

### **FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY**

The focus group lasted approximately two hours (7:00 – 9:00 PM). During that time, participants responded to a series of questions (indicated in bold below) posed by the facilitator; these questions are similar in purpose and general content to those being asked at all 16 focus group sessions. A summary of responses from meeting participants is provided below, including selected direct quotes that help illustrate particular themes or key points in that discussion.

#### **How important is hound hunting for you compared to other types of hunting or recreation that you and your family take part in?**

Participants indicated that bear hound hunting was a very important activity to them. Many participants indicated that hound hunting was a lifelong pursuit, a shared family activity, a familial and cultural tradition, and a way to build friendships. Nearly all participants stressed the importance of the hounds to their hunting experience.

*“I do all kinds of hunting, but the hound hunting for me, is top of the line.”*

*“We can’t run dogs...for the first two weeks and I don’t even attempt to deer hunt because if I can’t hear the dog run, it’s not worth my time. Same with bear. Don’t bear hunt without my hounds.”*

*“My grandfather was a fox hunter... My father and uncle, they took after the tree hounds.... I followed daddy from a young age... There’s a passion, a love, I don’t know what you’d call it. But, there’s a passion or love for hounds that you can’t explain unless you’ve been there. It’s one of the greatest thing I’ve ever done with my life.”*

### **What are the two or three most important aspects of hunting with hounds to you?**

Love of the hounds, quality time in the woods, and strong stewardship ethics were some of the most important aspects of hound hunting participants identified. Participants equated their dogs to their children and described the intense pride felt when one is successful.

*“These dogs are like family members. Hey, I got one who comes in and watches CMT.... They’re like kids.”*

*“It’s a relationship. It’s a strong bond that a man has with his dog.”*

*“You know, bear hunting with hounds provides more hours of recreation for more people per animal killed than any other form of hunting except fox hunting where you don’t take the game at all. And people think that you get every bear you get after, they should know better.”*

*“People forget sometimes that most of these conservation theories that have come up and created the increase in the bear population were one hundred percent supported by the bear hunters association and the regulation to where you don’t kill a sow with cubs was totally from Virginia Bear Hunters Association suggestion.”*

### **What do you believe to be the most important issues facing hunters who use hounds today?**

Participants indicated that the right-to-retrieve, access to large tracts of land, declining numbers of hunters, and misconceptions about hound hunting are some of the biggest issues facing the hound hunting community. Participants feel that some of these misconceptions might influence the outcome of the Study.

*“Our farms are disappearing, our huntable lands are disappearing, the habitat for the wildlife is disappearing so we’re all concerned ourselves.”*

*“That retrieving law, that’s the key in this state. Because [I’ve] hunted in West Virginia and you can see your dogs in the field but they won’t let you walk on that land and sometimes they’ll charge you money to go get your dog.”*

*“I think people just don’t understand bear hunting and they don’t understand that it’s not about killing. They have this mind-set that bear hunters are just the lowest form of life. I think the department could do a much better job of educating the public as far as the fact that the bear population in the state has risen...and that harvesting bear is good bear management.”*

*“We really don’t know where this things going to go. We really don’t trust this study. We’re weren’t for it. We didn’t ask for it. But, its shoved down our throats and now we have to deal with it. We don’t like it. We feel threatened. Our culture, one more time, is being threatened.”*

Participants made a number of suggestions about how to address reduced hunting access and hunter numbers.

*“Hunter numbers. If we don’t make it more convenient and interesting for the young people to get involved in the sport, we’re all going to hurt...I believe it’s one of the best ways to get people interested in hunting is to hunt with a dog because they don’t have to be quiet and they don’t have to be still and they can go out and actually see other aspects of the forest.”*

*“I’d like to be proactive on that and find a way for the game commission to have money to purchase land for WMAs because I think that’s going to be one of the main factors in saving hound hunting and all hunting, but especially hound hunting.*

*“Some program for these large landowners to get a tax-incentive to allow this hunting or open it up.”*

### **What do you think is the most appropriate way to deal with those issues?**

Participants expressed some skepticism that problems related to hound hunting were really severe enough to warrant this study. They were concerned that complaints from a small number of people are driving the process. They were also concerned that the process, modeled on a small scale in Ft. Lewis, would not work at the statewide level. A few participant were somewhat disappointed in the results of another Virginia Tech project, the Cooperative Alleghany Bear Study (CABS), which, they felt, resulted in more regulations.

*“I don’t see the confrontation...I don’t see it....All of my experiences were good. I can’t help but to be skeptical.”*

Participants suggested, however, that greater efforts could be made to educate and communicate with the public to increase tolerance for hound hunting. They also suggested that more liberal chase seasons might help reduce bear hound hunter density during certain parts of the year. Finally, they indicated that stronger protection is needed for hunting dogs, who are occasionally shot by other hunters.

*“A more liberal season, especially being able to hunt in the night, when it’s cool. And being able to spread it out over a longer period of time would ease the congestion and a lot of the concerns with just the month or two that we have. If we had a longer training season.”*

*“If they would allow us to take our dogs out and run them at night, especially during the chase season, we wouldn’t be in conflict with people going on a picnic, or going horseback riding, or hiking. And the general public would be less aware that we were even out there.”*

*“Maybe people could be taught to be tolerant of us and they way we live.”*

*“It appears to me that the education has got to be through the mass media and they’ve got to put forth a concerted effort to educate the newcomers to our home turf that this is a way of life and when you come here, don’t come here expecting to change what brought you here to begin with.”*

*“I know people that’s had dogs shot....Most of the time these things happen its...another hunter that’s a non-dog hunter. They can’t stand dog hunting. Period. And they’ll shoot that dog, just because he comes out somewhere or something.”*

Participants were particularly concerned that bear hound hunters, in particular, were being singled out for criticism.

*“It’s all about always look at us and make us out as being the bad guys and I don’t think we deserve that, I don’t think the data supports it, I don’t think they have any such data. It’s not fair.”*

## SUMMARY

Overall, bear hound hunters who participated in this focus group meeting were extremely passionate about bear hound hunting. They expressed a deep commitment to their sport, as well as a love of bears and stewardship for the bear population in the state. Many were lifelong bear hound hunters and some indicated that they would not hunt without dogs. Bear hound hunters in this focus group did acknowledge that they have seen changes in landownership patters in places where they hunt, and have seen attitudes of rural landowners become less tolerant of hunting, especially bear hound hunting. Although some participants did not have any personal experience with conflicts and felt that bear hound hunters were being singled out for criticism, others implied that conflicts exist. Participants suggested that longer chase seasons and education might help reduce conflicts.